

# **Crediting women? A comparative perspective on credit markets and gender inequality in late medieval Brabant.**

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**Abstract:** Social scientists emphasize that economic development and women's empowerment are closely interrelated. The abilities of women to participate in credit markets is considered a crucial aspect of this relationship (Yunus 2008). Nevertheless, female involvement in (private) credit markets has received little attention in studies of premodern finance, especially outside rural England. This paper addresses this issue through a study of the late medieval Low Countries. Considered one of the leading regions in the 'little divergence' (Van Zanden 2009) and the premier region in the development of the European Marriage Pattern during the Late Middle Ages (De Moor and Van Zanden 2010), this case is of particular importance to the debates on the historical connections between women's economic opportunities and economic development.

Through a comparative study of two cities, this paper explores gendered participation in credit markets in growing and shrinking economies. The case study consists of two cities in the former duchy of Brabant with opposite economic trajectories during the fifteenth century: Antwerp entered a period of rapid economic growth as it became the commercial metropolis of northwestern Europe, while Leuven faced a sustained economic decline. By making use of aldermen's registers, sources containing economic contracts of all sorts, the paper studies the investment strategies of women and men in urban credit markets. This includes an examination of how gender relations influenced these patterns, and how these patterns were affected by differences in marital and status.